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Two samples of college undergraduates (N=103 and N=193) were asked to rate the degree to which each of 50 adjectives was applicable to their idea of a normal personality in an effort to determine the dominant characteristics in their conception of a normal personality. The resulting data were subjected to a maximum likelihood factor analysis. Four of the factors obtained from the first set of data were replicated in the cross-validation sample. These four factors were: (1) a large, general factor which seemed to represent a dimension of positive characteristics; (2) a stable, rational factor; (3) a neat, clean factor; and (4) an active, talkative factor. The implications of these results are discussed. The main implication is that there is not one definition of normality which could be agreed upon by college students. (Author/KJ)

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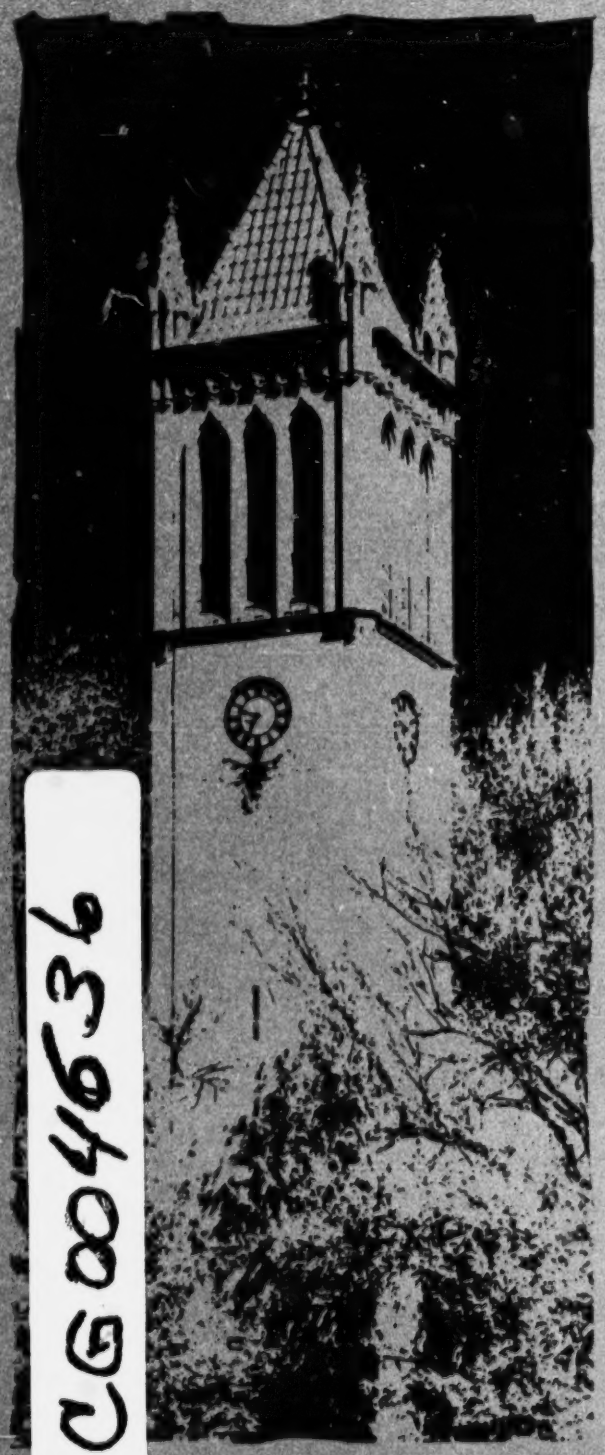

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College Students' Conception of a Normal Personality

Frederick L. Stevens, Jr.

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Report 69-08

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College Students' Conception of a Normal Personality[1]

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Abstract

Two samples of college undergraduates (N=103 and N=193) were asked to rate the degree to which each of 50 adjectives was applicable to their idea of a normal personality in an effort to determine the dominant characteristics in their conception of a normal personality. The resulting data were subjected to a maximum likelihood factor analysis. Four of the factors obtained from the first set of data were replicated in the cross-validation sample. These four factors were: (I) a large, general factor which seemed to represent a dimension of positive characteristics; (II) a stable, rational factor; (III) a neat, clean factor; and (IV) an active, talkative factor. The implications of these results were discussed.

The concept of normality, or normal personality, is one which has long escaped adequate definition or description. Many of the attempts to deal with the concept have been purely on a theoretical level (Hacker, 1945; Jones, 1942; Shoben, 1957). These theoretical formulations have rarely, if ever, been tested empirically.

Most of the empirical attempts to describe or define a normal personality have approached the problem by selecting a group of supposedly normal individuals by various methods and attempting to obtain descriptions of the characteristics of these normal individuals. For example, Bonney (1962) used peer-student nominations to obtain a group of highly normal college students and then attempted to describe these persons through interview and test data.

Similarly, Bond (1952) presents data consisting of the descriptions of case histories of relatively normal individuals. In this case, members of college student councils were chosen as subjects.

Golden, J., Mandel, N., & Glueck, B. C. (1962) have also provided descriptions of "normal" white males. The criterion for selection as normal in this study was an MMPI profile with no score above 55.

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As is evident from this brief sampling of studies, the criterion for selection of "normal" individuals varies considerably. One also gets the impression that the authors of these studies are implying that the descriptive characteristics which they present can be readily applied to any "normal" individual, when in fact, their results should be viewed tentatively and generalized only with extreme caution.

Another possible approach to this problem of what constitutes a normal personality is to have individuals define what the concept of normal personality means to them. This is the approach which will be utilized in the present study.

The objective of the present study was to determine the dominant characteristics in college students' conception of a normal personality.

Method

In the initial part of this study, 50 undergraduates enrolled in a reading and study skills course were asked to list ten one-word adjectives which described the characteristics that they felt were most important in making up a normal personality. From these lists, the characteristics which were listed by three or more persons were identified and used to form a 50-item scale. This scale was administered to 103 undergraduates enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course. Another sample of 193 undergraduates was later obtained to serve as a validation sample. The subjects were instructed to rate on a five-point scale the degree to which each of the adjectives was applicable to their idea of a normal personality. The responses to the items on this scale were intercorrelated and then subjected to a maximum likelihood factor analysis. This was followed by a Procrustes rotation of the resulting factor vectors. The first set of data was used to determine the position of the factor vectors and then this same analysis was performed on the cross-validation sample.

Results

The factor analytic operations on the first set of data resulted in the extraction of eight factors. Six of these were clearly interpreted, while the other two were too small to be of importance. The first factor was characterized by appreciable loadings on a majority of the 50 items, with very high loadings (.71-.78) on several of the items. Since the variables loading highly on this factor are generally socially desirable characteristics, this factor was labeled a good-bad dimension, with a normal personality seen as embodying many positive characteristics. The other five important factors seem to characterize the normal personality as: (II) an active, talkative person; (III) a stable, rational person; (IV) a friendly, helpful person (the boy-scout type); (VI) a neat, optimistic person (the non-hippy type); and (VIII) a self-centered, opinionated person.

The results of the same analysis applied to the validation sample indicated that four factors were replicated. The replicated factors were: (I) the large, general factor representing a good-bad dimension; (II) the active, talkative factor; (III) the stable, rational factor; and (IV) the neat, clean factor. Table 1 presents these replicated factors with the items loading highly on each.

Discussion

The results of this study seem to indicate that the college students sampled have differing conceptions of the normal personality. Most of them view the concept as a socially desirable one involving a wide variety of good characteristics. This finding is not really surprising when one considers that "normal" is often defined in terms of a person possessing many good or desirable qualities and lacking many undesirable qualities. It is also not surprising when one considers that these desirable qualities are often equated with a rather successful person, and it is probably safe to assume that the majority of the subjects in this study are generally exposed to reasonably successful people. Hence, one possible explanation for this first, large factor is that these subjects' objective viewpoint of the normal personality does include all of the items that loaded highly on the factor.

Another possible explanation for the first factor is that the subjects were equating normal with something else (e.g., an ideal conception) in their responding. Since the task of defining the concept "normal personality" was left completely up to each individual, it seems entirely possible that they may have responded in terms of their ideal, rather than the "normal."

One way of investigating these two possible explanations for the first factor may be to ask subjects to respond to the items with regard to a normal personality, an ideal personality, and also with regard to themselves. If the conceptions of "normal" and "ideal" turned out to be almost identical, it would seem that the subjects were equating the two; whereas if these two conceptions turned out to be different, it would seem that the subjects were responding more from their objective viewpoint of a normal personality. This suggestion is very similar to the study by Poe and Matias (1969) which is also being presented at this symposium.

In addition to the large, general factor obtained, there were three smaller factors which were cross-validated, indicating that some of the subjects seem to view normality as involving more specific characteristics.

One of these factors (Factor III) pictured the normal personality as a stable, rational individual. This conception seems to agree with that proposed by several writers who have referred to the normal as "psychologically healthy" (Foreman, 1966; Schultz, 1958).

Another of the smaller factors (Factor IV) characterizes the normal person as neat, clean, and moral. This conception doesn't seem to fit as well with any of the other writers on this topic, but it still may have some importance. For example, this description could possibly describe the opposite of a hippy individual. It may be that in defining a normal person, some of the subjects have reacted against these hippy-types which are constantly being represented in the news media.

The other smaller factor (Factor II) describes the normal personality as active, talkative, and energetic. Again, this description does not seem to fit any particular theoretical conception, but is quite understandable when considering that college students are generally very active, and very verbal individuals.

In interpreting or generalizing these results however, it is necessary to keep in mind the sample upon which they are based. I think it would be very foolish for anyone to assume that the factors which have been obtained here would also be obtained with another group of different subjects. This is really an empirical question. It would be necessary to test other varied groups of people to determine the correspondence in their conceptions of a normal personality.

In conclusion, I think these results imply that there is not one definition of normality which could be agreed upon by college students. Instead, there are differing viewpoints as to the distinguishing characteristics of the normal personality. This further implies that instead of trying to define normality generally, it may be more fruitful to try and clarify the aspects of a normal personality in different, specific settings, or with different groups of individuals.

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Table 1

Items Loading Highly on the Replicated Factors

FACTOR I	FACTOR II
friendly (.52-.65) thoughtful (.63-.68) helpful (.65-.71) pleasant (.60-.65) sincere (.73-.74) honest (.74-.77) concerned (.71-.68) considerate (.75-.82) humorous (.44-.52) stable (.44-.52) courteous (.76-.80) sociable (.48-.49) industrious (.42-.48) loyal (.69-.61) happy (.61-.46) loving (.51-.47) reliable (.65-.68) determined (.46-.46) likeable (.53-.57) mature (.44-.62) sense of humor (.51-.56) amiable (.45-.41) open-minded (.48-.63) realistic (.45-.61) kind (.76-.80) understanding (.78-.77) responsible (.64-.69) cheerful (.52-.57) polite (.63-.53) level-headed (.48-.48)	active (.58-.50) talkative (.55-.65) energetic (.49-.50)
	FACTOR III
	stable (.39-.52) rational (.40-.51) open-minded (.36-.46) realistic (.39-.34)
	FACTOR IV
	neat (.29-.53) clean (.35-.62) moral (.30-.60)

Note. ---- The first number in parenthesis represents the factor loading of the item from the first sample and the second number is the factor loading from the cross-validation sample.